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Cyber bullying and young people: Treatment principles not simplistic advice.

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Scenario

A 13-year-old comes to your office crying. She says she is feeling hopeless, that no-one likes her, that she can't concentrate on her schoolwork and if this is what life is all about she wants to give up, she can't handle it anymore. Eventually she mentions that her classmates have been awful to her, especially in their blogs and SMS's to her. What is she talking about? When she sees them at school, they either taunt or ignore her. How do you help?

What is Cyber bullying?

The Internet has been described as transforming society by providing a new type of person-to-person communication and the mobile/cell phone has transformed the peer group into a truly networked society. These technologies however, are now being used by adolescents in ways that were unintended by their designers to bully their peers. Methods used to bully include texting derogatory messages on mobile phones with students showing text messages to other students before sending them to victims, by sending threatening e-mails and forwarding a confidential e-mail to all their address book contacts, thus publicly humiliating the first sender. Students are ganged up on and bombarded with 'flame' e-mails, emails that are designed to inflame or enrage. While participants in chat rooms can slag a targeted student or continually exclude individuals. Blogs are being set up and used as derogatory web sites dedicated to targeted students while other students are e-mailed the web address of the blog and their comments invited. In addition, web sites can be set up for others to vote on the biggest geek, or sluttiest girl in the school. One widely reported incident occurred in the United States when a self-made film of a 15 year-old Quebec boy emulating a Star Wars

fight was posted on the Internet by three of his classmates. Millions of people downloaded the film and prompted the media to dub him “the Star Wars Kid” (Snider & Borel, 2004). Bullying using technology or cyber bullying as coined by Canadian Bill Belsey (www.cyberbullying.ca) is a phenomena which children and adolescents seem to be increasingly using to harm others (Campbell, 2005; National Children’s Home Study, 2002; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004).

How widespread is the problem?

The incidence of cyber bullying is difficult to determine at this time as there is scant published research. The limited results to date vary from country to country. In Canada (Li, 2006) 24.9% of adolescents reported they have been cyber bullied, compared to only 14% in Australia (Campbell, 2005) and 7% in North America (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). The incidence has also varied over time with 25% of young people reporting being targets of cyber bullying in one of the first studies in 2002 (NCH, 2002). In 2005 the incidence seemed to have increased to 35% (Patchin & Hinduja, 2005). The incidence of cyber bullying is thus presently difficult to determine, exacerbated by the tendency of researchers to often use loose definitions of bullying to include all forms of cyber aggression and not just bullying. However, overall the incidence of cyber bullying would seem to be about 20% (MSN, 2006; Smith, Mahdavi, Carvalho, & Tippett, 2005).

One important issue for psychologists is to be able to differentiate between bullying and fighting. One way to make this distinction is to use the four widely agreed concepts of bullying which are:

- intent to hurt
- an imbalance of power
- repetition
- and that victims are unable to defend themselves.

Although these concepts would seem to apply to cyber bullying, there are some contentious issues about definitions around cyber bullying research at the moment.

Whether girls or boys are more involved in cyber bullying is yet to be determined. For face-to-face bullying most studies have shown that boys and girls report similar levels of victimisation (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996; Smith & Shu, 2000). However, some studies report more boys being bullied than girls (Hazler, Hoover, & Oliver, 1992; Rigby, 1997; Rigby & Slee, 1991). In cyber bullying it seems that girls could be more involved in bullying as they are more likely to communicate regularly by email and texting than boys (Blair, 2003) as well as traditionally bullying by verbal and psychological means. This has been confirmed in a small study (Smith et al., 2005), however, Beran & Li, (2005) found no gender differences.

Younger children in primary school report more face-to-face bullying by peers than adolescents in secondary school (Rigby, 1997; Rigby & Slee, 1991). However, in the case of cyber bullying it may be that older children cyber bully more as younger children do not use the technology for communication with their peers as much as older students. The question of whether young people who cyber bully also bully face-to-face, or if there is a new breed of bullies who only cyber bully is unresolved at this time. However, in one study 64% of cyber bullies admitted to bullying face-to-face as well (Smith et al., 2005), which still means that 36% bully only using technological means.

Consequences of cyber bullying

To date the only consequences of cyber bullying that we know about have been suicides reported in the media (Marshall, 2005). However, it is known from research that face-to-face bullying can lead to severe physical harm, self-harm attempts (Coggan, Bennett, Hooper, & Dickinson, 2003) and suicide (Coloroso, 2004; Kumpulainen et al., 1998; Rigby & Slee, 1999). Further, reported consequences of face-to-face bullying include increased levels of depression, anxiety and psychosomatic symptoms in victims (Kaltiala-Heino

et al., 2000; Kumpulainen et al., 1998; Roland, 2002). Bullied students also feel more socially ineffective and have greater interpersonal difficulties (Craig, 1998; Forero et al., 1999), together with higher absenteeism from school and lower academic competence with consequent implications for their future careers (Rigby, 1997; Zubrick et al., 1997). However, it is still unclear if these symptoms are antecedents or consequences of bullying (Hodges & Perry, 1999; Roland, 2002). Thus the direction of causality may be both ways (Kaltiala-Heino et al., 2000) and this is important for diagnosis and treatment.

While there is scant research on the consequences of cyber bullying it is hypothesised that it could have even more serious consequences than face-to-face bullying. Cyber bullying has a variety of factors which may accentuate the impact of the bullying behaviour, potentially including a wider audience, anonymity, the more enduring nature of the written word and the ability to reach the target at any time and in any place including previously considered safe havens such as the target's home. Additionally, bullies may be more emboldened because they cannot see their victims and believe because of their anonymity that they will not be detected. It has also been postulated that because the bullies do not see the immediate reaction of their victim, they may increase the intensity of the attacks and continue for longer than they would face-to-face (Conn, 2004). Although bullying by physical violence can only be threatened, not conducted, by technology, research has shown that verbal and psychological bullying may have more negative long term effects (Reid, Monsen, & Rivers, 2004).

What to do

While there is no evidenced-based treatment for cyber bullying there is lots of advice available on the Internet. However, much of this advice tends to be simplistic or even harmful. This situation has occurred, some say, because of the generation gap (Strom & Strom, 2005) with few adults able to provide wise counsel because of their lack of technological understanding. However, perversely many adults propose an over reliance on perceived technological

and legal solutions. However, bullying by any means is a social problem and the simplistic advice available on the Internet ignores this basic fundamental proposition. Young people prefer to communicate both face-to-face and online. They have an online and an offline social life. They bully online and they bully offline. If bullying is conceived as a relationship problem in the broad social sphere then social solutions are going to work better than just technological and/or legal solutions. There are some technological tips that can help and some legal avenues for serious cases but mostly it is a social problem about relationships and therefore falls within the expertise of psychologists.

Working with young people

The Victims

When young people have been bullied they rarely report to adults, with less than a quarter of bullied students ever telling a teacher (Rigby, 1997). It is known that there are many reasons why young people do not tell adults and humiliation and embarrassment rank highly among them (Petersen & Rigby, 1999). In addition, many young people think that either their report will not be believed or that the incident will be trivialised by adults, or that they will be made to feel that they are responsible for being bullied. They also do not have much faith that adults can solve the problem and fear that adults might make it worse (Petersen & Rigby, 1999). In an Australian study (Campbell, 2005) young people said that adults did not understand that they had an online life so they wouldn't understand. One student even said that teachers don't have mobile phones so how could they understand. In addition, cyber bullied students fear that adults will take the technology away from them, that they will either lose their mobile phone or will not be allowed on the Internet. In the National Children's Home study (NCH, 2002) nearly 30% of cyber bullied students told no one. Therefore to be in a psychologist's office, either self-referred or referred by others means that they want to talk to you about the issue or that they have told someone. Therefore, the client needs to be congratulated on his/her help seeking behaviour and reassured that the cyber bullying isn't his/her fault.

Often, beginning psychologists want to help bullying victims by increasing their “self-esteem”; teaching them to stand up for themselves. However, it is crucial that this is done in a particular way as one can inadvertently disempower an already disempowered (by definition) person.

- The **first principle** is to ask the young person how they would like to be helped. As with any client one needs to individualise the solution. If the adolescent has self reported congratulate him/her on having the courage to report. Similar to reporting physical and sexual abuse by adults, young people who tell of being bullied want it to stop even though they might not want you to do anything.
- The **second principle** is to keep reinforcing that it isn't their fault and that they in fact don't have to change. Avoid saying you need to be assertive, you need to stand up to the bullies, just tell them to stop, or ignore them. The client will be afraid and will feel blamed that s/he hasn't done these things. There is a chance that a vulnerable young person will overact with aggressiveness and retaliate as did the students at Columbine high school. Advice about telling the bully to stop in face-to-face bullying could be seen as provocative to the bully and too frightening for the victim. Similarly in cyber bullying Conn (2004) has shown that young people who message the bully to stop found that it actually increased the bullying. Even by telling clients about strategies to cope (unless they ask), the underlying message is that it still it is their fault and they should do something about it.
- As well as investigating of how to stop the bullying in a practical way (see working with parents, schools and the law below) it is just as important to treat any serious consequences of the bullying. Therefore, the **third principle** is to carefully ascertain if bullying is the main problem or if there was a pre-existing psychological disorder, usually

anxiety or depression which has been exacerbated, or if the bullying itself has induced a psychological problem.

- The **fourth principle**, as bullying in cyber space or the playground is a social problem, is to provide the client with some positive peer relations and social cohesion, where peers and friends can support and protect him/her.

The Bullies

It is very interesting that there seems to be no advice given about dealing with bullies on line, all the advice is for the victims. This is probably because bullies usually don't self refer and they are often not referred by their parents. Sometimes however, schools will refer and therefore most times you will have a reluctant client. However, these clients are still young and need help to change their behaviour so that they don't continue to abuse their power. The consequences of being a bully are nearly as severe as the consequences of being a victim. It has been shown that face-to-face bullies have greater adjustment problems in adulthood than their classmates. Around 25% of children in primary school who pushed and shoved and stole other peers' belongings had a criminal record by the age of 30 (Sanders & Phye, 2004). Bullies also typically become adults with unstable relationships, record higher than average rates of alcoholism, exhibit more frequent personality disorders and use mental health services more than their non-bullying peers (Sullivan, 2000). Therefore, we need to intervene early to assist these young people and not just punish them. They need to be shown how they can satisfy their own needs without hurting others.

Sometimes because of the anonymity that students believe they have when they cyber bully, they are emboldened to bully more than they would face-to-face. Fear of punishment is also lessened because of their perceived invisibility and because they can't directly see the effects of their taunting and threats, can lessen feelings of empathy and remorse. If bullies haven't

realised just how much damage they have done or are unaware of the possible consequences of their actions then the intervention could be some empathy education and understanding of the consequences. However, if the young person takes delight in bullying and feels powerful because of it, has been punished and feels angry, then it is a much more difficult process. As bullies often have an inflated self-esteem, self-control programs have been suggested (Baumeister & Vohs, 2003). Working in an ecological model, including the family, school and community, is important rather than simplistic advice.

Working with parents

Often parents tell their kids to ignore a bully or to fight back or that they will deal with the bullies. None of this advice is helpful. Advice by others to parents to bully proof your children has the underlying assumption that it could be the victims' fault that they are picked on and it is the victims that need to change their attitude or behaviour. Changes are suggested such as: stop being nervous or just wear the same clothes as others. Or if it is something that cannot be changed such as their hair, skin colour or sexual preference the young people are told to that they need to learn to take it on the chin, ignore the bullies and be confident and they won't be picked on.

- Rather than this kind of advice, talking and listening and developing good relationships between parents and children is more important as a principle.
- Supervision by parents is also an important area that needs to be addressed. We know supervising face-to-face in the playground by adults reduces bullying. Therefore, parents need to monitor their children, both to see if there are any signs of bullying and/or to see if their kids are cyber bullying others. Net research (2007) shows that 50% of kids say they are alone online most of the time, with only 16% of kids saying they talk to their parents a lot about what they do online.

- Advice is often given to put the computer in the lounge room but this is often impractical. Further, it is extremely difficult to supervise mobile phone use. Instead there should also be agreed upon family rules for both computer and mobile phone use.

Working with the community –police, ISP providers and schools

Working with young people needs to be done in context – with their family, their community and their school.

Police

Reporting to police is one of the solutions to cyber bullying touted on the Internet. Even an Australian States' Education department gave advice to that effect to their schools (U R Out!,2004). If the cyber bullying is of such a serious nature as to constitute a criminal offence then it must be reported. It should be noted that under Australian law, the child must be over 11 years of age to be considered to understand the consequences of their actions. However, most cyber bullying is not so serious, it is more insidious and repetitious. Comments such as "yur a loser" or "your not invited 2 my party" are common. Many adults unfortunately confuse sexual predation by adults with bullying by peers just because both can use the Internet.

Technological providers

Reporting to the technological providers such as Internet Service Providers, for serious cases is an option. ISP's have acceptable use policies and can track down instant messaging as emails leave "fingerprints" nine-digit numbers recorded with the ISP. New mobile phone technology has also just been launched which retrieves court admissible evidence. However, as cyber bullying is an embedded social problem, these are only evidence gathering solutions not people solutions.

Schools

As young people now have an almost seamless online and offline social life and school is an important social place, it is likely that the young person in your office has either been bullied by or bullies peers who attend the same school. It could therefore be beneficial to collaborate with the school counsellor/psychologist and administration staff to assist not only your client but also to help the school with appropriate prevention and intervention strategies. Educating young people about the consequences of cyber bullying, about the harm caused to the victim and the consequences for bullies could be conducted at school. It is also important that parents and teachers are educated in what can be done at school. Ensuring that the school's anti-bullying policy, required under the Australian National Safe Schools framework, is ethical, legally defensible and operationalised into clear and transparent procedures and that it includes cyber bullying is imperative. Psychologists can assist schools to increase cyber bullying reporting, involve bystanders in peer support programs and embed anti-bullying programs and values and empathy training.

Recommended resources

Best book: Coloroso, B. (2004). *The bully, the bullied, and the bystander*. New York: Harper Collins.

Best websites: Bullying No Way and www.cyberbullying.ca .

Quick Glance Summary

- Young people now have an online and an offline social life
- Bullying, the repetitive intentional abuse of power, is carried out by young people both on and offline
- Bullying through technology is an increasing insidious problem
- The consequences could be more serious if the bullying is done online

- Bullying is a social problem so technological and legal solutions aren't going to fix it

Victims

- Victims need to be empowered
- It is not the victims fault they are bullied.
- As well as helping the victim, deal with the bullying carefully, diagnose and treat any other conditions such as anxiety and depression.

Bullies

- Not many young people who bully will come to see you, therefore they are usually reluctant clients
- Assist bullies to change their behaviour
- There are usually 2 classes of bullies – those who didn't realise the consequences of their actions and those who do
-

Working with parents/community

- Supervise, talk and take in an interest in your children's social life both off and online
- Report only serious cases to police and ISP
- Work closely with schools for prevention and early intervention

Main points

- Bullying is an embedded social problem
- Work within an ecological model of clients, families, communities and schools

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